

The government's growth review shows the need for serious debate on planning reforms

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/04/01/government-planning-reforms-debate-needed/?pfstyle=w p>

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The government's localism agenda includes a revamp of the current planning system, aimed at speeding up the process and making development easier. This new programme of reform has alarmed some commentators, but [Henry Overman](#) finds that a more serious debate on the costs and benefits of the planning system is needed.

The government [growth review](#) (launched alongside the budget last week) is calling for "radical changes to the planning system to support job creation by introducing a powerful presumption in favour of sustainable development; opening up more land for development, while retaining existing controls on greenbelt land; introducing new land auctions starting with public sector land; consulting on the liberalisation of use classes; and ensuring all planning applications and appeals will be processed in 12 months and major infrastructure projects will be fast-tracked".

Planning delivers many benefits, but it is also costly (in terms of resources to implement, the way in which it affects costs of living, its negative impact on economic growth). Many would argue, myself included, that we need a serious debate about whether these costs now outweigh the benefits and whether reform is needed. Depressingly, I am deeply skeptical about whether or not we are going to get that serious debate.

Here is what Richard Summers, President of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), which represents almost 23,000 of Britain's planning professionals said in response to the budget:

If sweeping changes announced to the planning system result in the default position being 'yes' to development then there is real danger that within a decade we will end up with an England of tin sheds, Lego land housing and US style shopping malls.

I simply don't see how that kind of comment adds to the public debate. Someone reading that in, say, East Surrey might fear that these reforms mean huge amounts of development will soon arrive on their door step (a third of East Surrey's population work in London and house prices in London and the South East are very high). But [according to my colleague Paul Cheshire](#), 77.8% of the area of East Surrey is Greenbelt and, as the growth paper makes clear, existing controls on the greenbelt will be retained.

As the [RTPI itself notes](#) "Good planning combines an awareness of the competing pressures on our built environment with an ability to manage the very real effects on our space." Yet their [comment on the budget](#) simply ignores arguments about the potential economic costs of our current planning system. Not an auspicious start for a very important debate.